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The politics of commemorative street renaming: Berlin 1945–1948

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Abstract

Commemorative street names belong to the ideological foundations of the socio-political order. The process of renaming streets figures prominently in a stage of regime change. As a measure of historical revision, renaming the past is a twofold procedure that involves both the de-commemoration of the version of history associated with and supportive of the old regime and the commemoration of heroes and events that represent the new regime and its version of history. This paper examines political processes and commemorative priorities and strategies that directed the renaming of streets in post-World War II Berlin during two successive municipal administrations. The first part of the article explores the failed project promoted by the unelected communist administration that ruled Berlin between May 1945 and October 1946 aimed to achieve a comprehensive odonymic reform that went beyond a mere purge of explicit Nazi street names. The second part examines the substantially downscaled purge of Berlin's register of street names accomplished by the SPD-led city government that took office after the October 1946 democratic election.

Keywords: Berlin; Street names; Commemoration; Public memory; Regime change

Expressive of political and ideological reorientation, acts of pulling down monuments and renaming streets are symptomatic of periods of regime change and revolutionary transformations. Following the surrender of the Third Reich in May 1945, the creation of an 'anti-fascist' and democratic regime in occupied Germany was a key priority. The de-nazification of public life involved purging Nazi officials from public office and the resurgence of political life based on the shared principle of 'antifascism' as the underpinning of democratic renewal. It also included activities initiated by local authorities to purge the public sphere of symbolic representations of the Nazi regime.

The renaming of Berlin's streets began immediately after the surrender of the Third Reich. The process was initiated and carried out by different branches of municipal administration with the aim to rid the former German capital of street names that were not in tune with the democratic ideals of the emergent 'anti-fascist' Germany. Understood as a politically expedient measure of commemorative revision, the project failed to materialize in the form envisioned by the communist-led city government: a radical odonymic reform aimed at eliminating Nazi and 'reactionary' commemorations.[1] The dynamic between party politics, local government structures and economic considerations complicated the process of street renaming. A substantially downscaled purge of Berlin's register of street names was arranged by the Social Democratic city government that assumed office after the October 1946 democratic elections. The long-awaited list of officially approved changes was signed into law in summer 1947, a little more than two years after the renaming project had been launched by the former administration.

Based on archival material and newspaper reports, this article explores Berlin's politics of street renaming as an aspect of the political geography and urban history of the city between the surrender of the Third Reich in May 1945 and the split of the city in November 1948. The analysis highlights how commemorative priorities and administrative procedures and practices underlay the renaming of streets in the former capital of the Reich under two successive administrations: the communist-led administration installed in May–June 1945 and the SPD-led administration formed after the municipal elections held in October 1946.

The politics of commemorative street (re)naming

A prerogative of elected or nominated authorities, and affected by competing administrative and political agendas for control over the public domain, the act of naming streets is an expression of power.[2] Commemorative measures of naming are embedded into the

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[1] The term 'odonym' refers to a street or road name.

[2] L. Berg and J. Vuolteenaho (Eds), *Critical Toponomies: The Contested Politics of Place Naming*, Farnham, 2009; R. Rose-Redwood, D.H. Alderman and M. Azaryahu, Geographies of toponymic inscriptions: new directions in critical place-names studies, *Progress in Human Geography* 30 (2010) 468–486.

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political geography of the city and the cultural geographies of public memory and everyday life.[3] The version of history inscribed in street signs and depicted in maps represents the commemorative priorities of former municipal authorities and political regimes.[4] The association of commemorative street names with specific social, cultural and political systems makes them, together with other symbolic expressions of power, vulnerable to shifts in political ideologies and discourses of history. Renaming streets figures prominently in periods of regime change and revolutionary transformations.[5] With the collapse of the imperial regime in France in 1815 some 50 streets in Paris were renamed. Most of them regained their pre-revolutionary names.[6] The renaming of streets also figured prominently in Paris after the establishment of the Third Republic in 1871.

The process of renaming streets introduces the transformation of the political order and the ideology of the new regime into mundane spheres of urban experience and even intimate levels of everyday life. When conducted in the context of a regime change, 'renaming history' – rewriting the history inscribed on street signs – is a powerful demonstration of ideological control over public urban space that resonates with the notion of a new beginning in political history. However, the scope and dynamic of 'renaming history' evince particular political and administrative pressures and incentives that induce and facilitate the odonymic reshaping of the city to make urban space consonant with the ideological underpinnings of the new regime and its vision of history.

A primary objective of renaming history in the context of a revolutionary transformation of society is to purge the register of street names of those that represent the old regime and its vision of history. The de-commemoration of the old regime is followed by the commemoration of heroes and events that represent the new regime and its vision of history. Commemorative measures may assume the form of re-commemoration, namely, reinstituting urban toponymic commemorations that had been deleted by the old regime after it assumed power. The restoration of the French monarchy following the defeat of the Napoleonic Empire was also evident in the restoration of pre-revolutionary street names in Paris. On top of de-commemorating the old regime, in its capacity as a restorative measure re-commemoration emphasizes historical continuity with the period that had preceded the old regime.

Berlin's street names 1813–1945

According to a Prussian royal decree from 1813, the naming of streets in the royal residence cities of Prussia – Berlin, Potsdam and Charlottenburg – was a prerogative of the Prussian king, or rather, the chief of police as the representative of the king. Following their 'nationalization', Berlin's street names commemorated Prussian military glory and members of the ruling Hohenzollern dynasty. Already in 1814 three squares were named as commemorations of Prussian victories over Napoleon, among them the Belle-Alliance-Platz in Kreuzberg. In 1864 the names of the Prussian generals Yorck, Gneisenau and Blücher, the heroes of the anti-Napoleonic Wars of Liberation, were commemorated on the street signs in Kreuzberg. When the Republic was proclaimed in 1918, the Prussian Ministry of the Interior replaced the king as the source of authorization, with the chief of police as the executive body in charge.

In 1920 Greater Berlin was agglomerated. As a result of the creation of Greater Berlin, duplicate street names and commemorations abounded in the German capital. For instance, 19 streets were named after Kaiser Wilhelm and 16 after his wife, Viktoria. Already in 1921 the municipal assembly debated the need to revise the version of national history commemorated by street names. In particular, the radical left demanded to erase the memory of the Hohenzollern dynasty from the street signs. Despite a resolution to this effect passed by the municipal assembly in 1927,[7] the *Magistrat* (Berlin's city government) avoided a large-scale purge of monarchic street names that could provoke conservatives and nationalists.

The Social Democrats, in contrast to the Communists, did not seek a comprehensive purge of monarchical commemorations. Their goal was to assert the idea of the Republic in Berlin's cityscape through the renaming of Königsplatz (King's Square), the square in front of the Reichstag, as Platz der Republik (Square of the Republic). In February of 1926, a few months after the elections that secured the workers' parties a majority in the municipal assembly, the Social Democrats proposed this politically resonant renaming of the square. The resolution passed 121–81.[8] Supported by the *Magistrat*, a few weeks later the renaming was carried out. The idea of the Republic was also represented by odonymic commemorations of leaders of the Republic. In 1925 a main thoroughfare, Budapesterstraße, in the city center was renamed after Friedrich Ebert, the Social Democrat leader and the first President of the Republic. In 1930 a street was renamed in Kreuzberg after Gustav Stresemann, Chancellor and Foreign Minister of the Weimar Republic. Albeit few in number, republican commemorations created in Berlin's cityscape a sense of historical continuity between the monarchy and the republic that followed it.

After the Nazi seizure of power in 1933, Republican commemorations were removed from the public sphere. The first change was restorative. On 30 March 1933 Platz der Republik received its former name, Königsplatz.[9] The Reichskanzlerplatz in Charlottenburg was renamed Adolf-Hitler-Platz. In September of 1933 the Friedrich-Ebert-Straße was renamed Hermann-Göring-Straße and in June the Bülowplatz in Friedrichshain, where the communist newspaper Die Rote Fahne had had its headquarters, was renamed after Horst Wessel, the supreme martyr of the National-Socialist movement.[10] After his death in 1934 a square in the vicinity of the Brandenburg Gate was named after Hindenburg, the venerated World War I military hero who had succeeded Ebert in 1925 as the second and last president of the Weimar Republic and conferred legitimacy on Adolf Hitler's nomination to the post of Chancellor in January 1933.[11] The Nazi authorities named streets after World War

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[7] Protocol, municipal assembly of Greater Berlin, session on 7 April 1927.

[8] *Gemeindeblatt der Stadt Berlin*, 67 (7), 14 February 1926. See also *Berliner Tageblatt*, 6 February 1926.

[9] *Amtsblatt der Stadt Berlin*, 74 (15), 9 April 1933.

[10] *Amtsblatt der Stadt Berlin*, 74 (37), 10 September 1933; *Amtsblatt der Stadt Berlin*, 74 (24), 11 June 1933.

[11] *Amtsblatt der Stadt Berlin*, 75 (30), 29 July 1934.